

## CHAPTER 3

### The Naturalistic Account of Ḥayy's Birth

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Only part of the naturalistic account is presented in this chapter following Ibn Ṭufayl's own presentation, as he commences it with describing the naturalistic account but interrupts the description to provide the traditionalistic account in what Sami Hawi views as his attempt to conceal his naturalistic position. A significant part of the discussion is devoted to Ibn Ṭufayl's liminal depiction of natural existence, which is compared to Ibn al-ʿArabī's. The discussion of Ibn al-ʿArabī's account of his visions in the Earth of *Barzakh* aims to throw light on the liminal characteristics that Ibn Ṭufayl emphasizes in his description of Ḥayy's naturalistic birthplace.

#### IBN ṬUFAYL'S METHOD OF CONCEALMENT

Ibn Ṭufayl introduces two accounts of Ḥayy's birth: naturalistic and traditionalistic. The question that presents itself immediately is: why two accounts? According to Hawi, Ibn Ṭufayl applies a method of concealment that involves an exoteric aspect, intended for the public, and an esoteric aspect, intended for the enlightened few. The traditionalistic account comes under the exoteric aspect, which includes the belief of the general public in God through revelation and the creation of the world, whereas the naturalistic account comes under the esoteric aspect, which includes the rational depiction of God's existence, the eternity of the world, the unity of all existence, and pantheism.<sup>1</sup> Since the two accounts are contradictory, Ibn Ṭufayl must be employing a method of concealment to hide his naturalistic views from the general public.<sup>2</sup> To hide his real view, Ibn Ṭufayl opens with the description of the naturalistic account of Ḥayy's birth, interrupts it to provide a succinct description of the traditionalistic account, and then resumes his presentation of the naturalistic account to describe Ḥayy's emergence from nature in rich scientific detail.<sup>3</sup>

It is not clear, however, how starting with a naturalistic rather than a traditionalistic account and elaborating on the former can be an effective method of concealing Ibn Ṭufayl's intentions if those are inconsistent with the beliefs of the exoteric public. I think it can be misleading to state, as Hawi does, that the traditionalistic account accords with the outward meaning of the treatise.<sup>4</sup> As I will attempt to show, Ibn Ṭufayl's presentation of the traditionalistic account carries with it deep mystical allusions meant to be understood as such—that is, allusions to be interpreted rather than outwardly comprehended.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it seems that Hawi's stated conviction that *Ḥayy* is a purely philosophical treatise precludes him from properly addressing the mystical component of the work. This, however, is strange to come from a scholar who complains, with so many affectionate words, against the manner in which analytic philosophy has detached itself from the broad intellectual involvedness and limited itself to concept analysis.<sup>6</sup> To show some fairness toward Hawi, I must emphasize that the task of relating philosophy to mysticism is especially complex. In a sense, the Ṣūfīs had their share in augmenting this complexity, especially those Ṣūfīs who showed serious antagonism to the philosophical enterprise. Indeed, the very warning of Ibn al-ʿArabī against rejecting certain views only because a certain philosopher expressed them indicates the relentless hostility that some Ṣūfīs displayed toward philosophers.<sup>7</sup> I think that the caution that Ibn Rushd exerted toward the Ṣūfīs, despite his recognition of the possibility of the materialization of the Ṣūfī ideal at the level of the individual,<sup>8</sup> is an indication of the philosophers' general reaction to mystics who were either extremely against the rationalists or so much drawn into their own world and encapsulated in their individualistic shells that he would expect little help from them to make reason a universal judge and ruler and to counter the theologians' attempt at confining it within dogmatic limits. As Ibn Ṭufayl was struggling with these concerns, he followed a method of striking balance and establishing harmony between the conflicting parties, even as this method was tinged with the shade of concealment.

#### SPONTANEOUS GENERATION

According to the naturalistic account, Ḥayy's birth occurred on an equatorial island in the Indian Ocean in which human beings are born without mother or father, and in which there are trees that yield women. According to Mas'ūdī, this is the island of *Wāqwāq*. Fārūk Sa'd points out that Mas'ūdī was not the only person to mention the island; he provides a list of names of others who mentioned it. Al-Maqdisī and al-Bayrūnī say that in India, there is a tree that is called *Wāqwāq* that bears women as fruit. Also, Zakariyya al-Qazwīnī mentions an island in the Sea of China in which there are trees that bear fruit in the form of women hanging by the hair and screaming "*wāq wāq*."<sup>9</sup> Qazwīnī describes another island as well, and his description of it can be related to what Maqdisī

and Bayrūnī say: “In the Island of Women in the Sea of China there are women and no men are with them originally. They conceive by the wind and give birth to women like themselves. It is said that they conceive by means of a fruit of some tree, which they eat and become pregnant ... A merchant relates that the wind cast him onto this island: ‘I saw women and no men with them. I also saw gold in this island like soil and I saw gold growing like branches of cane. The women were about to kill me when one of them laid me on a board and threw me to the sea. The wind cast me to China land. I reported to the ruler what I had seen concerning the island and the gold that it contained. He sent people to ascertain the report. They went for three years but could not find the island.’”<sup>10</sup>

Remke Kruk indicates that medieval Islamic science was aware of the fact that date palms bear fruit only if the dust of the male flower is sprinkled over the female, and the additional fact that an individual parent of a certain species could generate a new individual without cohabitation with the sexually different individual from the same species.<sup>11</sup> This seems to be in accord with Qazwīnī's saying that women in the Island of Women conceive either by the wind, which, we might add, carries the fecundating dust, or, by means of some fecundated fruit that they eat and give birth to women like themselves. As Kruk indicates, the date palm (*khūṣṣ*) and the beech (*zān*) are the only trees that Ibn Ṭufayl mentions by name in his work.<sup>12</sup> What is noticeable in Qazwīnī's description of the Island of Women and Ibn Ṭufayl's description of Ḥayy's island is the sense of unreachability posited in both accounts for keeping an island in which the best of minerals and the goal of all alchemical transformations, gold, is abundant and another, in which wisdom that is as rare as Red Sulphur<sup>13</sup> grows and flourishes in the finest souls, out of the reach of humans.<sup>14</sup>

Ibn Ṭufayl proceeds to describe the first account of Ḥayy's birth. The island in which people are generated spontaneously is most temperate and perfectly balanced due to its moderate air and the shining of the supernal light, rendering it the fittest place to receive the noblest form of life of the human being. Ibn Ṭufayl rejects the view of scientists from among philosophers and physicians that the region of the equator is one of a very intense heat, which, they say, explains why the fourth zone is actually the world's most temperate region.<sup>15</sup> Relying on assumptions admitted by those scientists, Ibn Ṭufayl proceeds to show that the sun does not heat the Earth in the same manner as hot bodies heat bodies that are near them; and then he develops the argument to show that the region of the equator is not extremely hot or extremely cold.

There are, he says, three causes of the generation of heat: motion, contact with hot bodies, and light. Now the sun itself is not hot, and the air that surrounds the Earth belongs to the group of transparent bodies that are the weakest in receiving heat. This, says Ibn Ṭufayl, had been demonstrated by Ibn Sīnā: “Likewise they teach that it is the highly reflective bodies, not the transparent ones, that take up light best; next are opaque, non-reflecting bodies; but transparent bodies with no trace of opacity do not take on light at all.

The foregoing point was proved by Avicenna, using an argument which was his original work.<sup>16</sup> The sun itself is not hot, and it does not heat air first and then the Earth by convection because we find that higher layers of air are cooler than those closer to the Earth. Also, the Earth is not heated by motion because it is stationary. From all this, it follows that heat follows light, which can be exemplified by referring to the fact that when light is collected in a burning-glass, it sets things on fire.<sup>17</sup> Now the sun, which is spherical, is much greater than the Earth, and at all times more than half of the Earth is illuminated by it. This constitutes a circle of light where the light is most intense in the center and diminishes toward the circumference of the circle, which is totally covered by darkness. In the location at the center, where the sun stands vertical over the heads of its inhabitants, heat is most intense and it becomes least when the sun stays farthest from the zenith. As astronomy affirms, in equatorial regions, the sun is vertical to the inhabitants of these regions only twice a year. The rest of the year, the sun declines to their north six months and to their south six months. Consequently, their states are uniform and they know neither excessive heat nor excessive cold. Ibn Ṭufayl closes this part of the naturalistic account with the following words: “This account is in need of further clarification, which we will not be able to provide here since it will not be fitting for our purpose. We only have drawn your attention to this matter since it confirms the genuineness of the report concerning the possibility of the generation of man in that region without mother or father. Some people conclude by making a final judgment that Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān was one of those who were engendered in that region without mother or father and some disagree and provide a different report that we will communicate to you.”<sup>18</sup>

Ibn Ṭufayl disrupts his naturalistic account of Ḥayy’s birth to bring up the traditionalistic account. He then reverts to the naturalistic account and ends up merging the two accounts with the first cry of the newborn. Hawi interprets Ibn Ṭufayl’s disruption of the narrative as part of a method of concealment. In my view, introducing the traditionalistic account right in the middle of the naturalistic account supports the fact that the latter account completes or complements the former, and it does that at the crucial point of discussing a notion that is central to both. **This is the notion of liminality, which had been at work throughout the history of Islamic thought and which took an especially significant turn with the illuminationists to reach full growth in Ibn al-‘Arabī.** Having said this, I think it will be useful to consider what Bernd Radtke says about a possible influence exerted by Ibn Ṭufayl on Ibn al-‘Arabī. Radtke follows Hawi in describing Ibn Ṭufayl’s views as emanationist, saying that this distinguishes him from the Ṣūfī masters, whose terminology he adopts but not their system of thought. “Nothing is more misleading,” he says, “than to see the Ṣūfī masters of the third/ninth century as ‘pantheistic’ predecessors of Ibn Ṭufayl. On the contrary, his ideas may well have cast down [the seed] for the monism of his compatriot, Ibn al-‘Arabī.”<sup>19</sup> Conrad agrees with Radtke,<sup>20</sup> and Vincent J. Cornell seems to agree with both,

although his statement that Ṣūfism is a unique methodology that encompasses different attitudes and types of mystical doctrines opens the door for a kind of relaxation of the tendency to label thinkers with a categorical designation, such as monism or pantheism.<sup>21</sup> In the following discussion, I will attempt to show how **Ibn al-ʿArabī's theory of the mystical unity of existence, properly understood and freed from the pantheistic preconceptions that have been attached to it, can be related to the liminal interpretation of the naturalistic account.**

#### A LIMINAL DEPICTION OF THE CHAIN OF EXISTENTS

In *ʿUqlat al-Mustawfiz*, Ibn al-ʿArabī presents a naturalistic liminal depiction of the chain of existents: “And generation proceeded in descending till it reached Earth. The first generation to take place on Earth was the generation of minerals, then plants, then animals, then man. The last of each kind of these generated existents was made the first of that which follows it. The last of minerals and the first of plants was the truffle;<sup>22</sup> the last of plants and first of animals was the date palm, and the last of animals and the first of man was the monkey. Let us then discuss the matter of the generation of man since this is the aim of this book.”<sup>23</sup>

Ibn al-ʿArabī's depiction of the chain of existents bears a striking similarity to Ibn Ṭufayl's. In both, liminality plays a crucial role, as we can see from Kruk's analysis of Ibn Ṭufayl's depiction of natural existence: “Ḥayy does not fail to notice that the boundaries between the different ‘realms’ of the scale of beings are by no means sharp.<sup>24</sup> Plants ... know how to move their roots toward food, and some flowers even turn their heads toward the sun.<sup>25</sup> In this respect, plants do already possess some ‘animality,’ which contributes to the notion of the essential unity of plants and animals. Ibn Ṭufayl ... touches here upon an interesting point: transitional forms between the mineral and the vegetable, the vegetable and the animal world have been pointed out since antiquity. Mushrooms<sup>26</sup> can be considered as stony vegetables, and sponges as vegetable animals; date palms, which have male and female individuals, die when their heads are cut off, and can fall in love, stand at the top of the vegetable kingdom as animal vegetables.”<sup>27</sup>

**Later in his spiritual development, Ḥayy became so intensely aware of the unifying circulation that runs through all existents and saw in its preservation an important part of maintaining his imitation of the eternal unified motion of the celestial bodies, which motion is their sole function, as well as what is responsible for their eternal subsistence.** To imitate their unlimited motion, Ḥayy would remove limitations that were inflicted upon animals and plants to the extent that these could be removed. When he observed a plant that was deprived of the light of the sun or an animal that was entangled in a snare, he would remove the interrupting body and release the animal from its entanglement.<sup>28</sup> Ibn Ṭufayl shows such a distinctive sensitivity and care for nature that Kruk finds it suitable to identify him as “the first ecology-conscious person in the

Islamic world.”<sup>29</sup> Kruk seems to have another reason for emphasizing the caring behavior of Ḥayy, and that is to draw our attention to the distinction between modern ecologists, for whom this kind of behavior may be perfectly plausible, and Ibn Ṭufayl and thinkers of medieval Islam, for whom “care for nature was a highly unlikely notion.”<sup>30</sup> Ḥayy could not have cared less about the world; rather, he sought to free himself from everything that had to do with it and rise above the level of generation and corruption to be part of the eternal world.<sup>31</sup>

Is it true that modern ecologists possess motives “generally of an immanent nature,”<sup>32</sup> to compare with the likes of Ibn Ṭufayl, who could not have cared less about what happened to the world? In the medieval world, there were no ecological problems of the sort that modern man experiences, and so it is pointless to talk about the lack of awareness of thinkers such as Ibn Ṭufayl in the first place. Moreover, it is not completely clear to me what is meant here by motives that are “of an immanent nature.” Modern ecologists endeavor to save the body of the world because they fear for the safety of their bodies, whereas Ḥayy sought to care for the body of the world because of a spiritual quest for holism. In this sense, modern man may as well be blamed, not for being selfish but for not being sufficiently so, since as Plato says: “That as you ought not to attempt to cure the eyes without the head, or the head without the body, so neither ought you to attempt to cure the body without the soul. And this ... is the reason why the cure of many diseases is unknown to the physicians of Hellas, because they disregard the whole, which ought to be studied also, for the part can never be well unless the whole is well.”<sup>33</sup>

#### IN THE EARTH OF *BARZAKH*

Chapter 8 of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Futūḥāt* is entitled: “On knowing the Earth that was created from the leftover fermented mass of the clay of Adam, peace be upon him, which is the Earth of truth, and the mention of some of the wonders and miracles therein.”<sup>34</sup> The words of the title bear a clear similarity to the words that Ibn Ṭufayl uses upon resuming his discussion of the naturalistic account of Ḥayy’s birth: “As for those who claim that he was generated from earth they say that in a depressed portion of earth in that island a mass of clay was fermented over the years that the elements: hot and cold, moist and dry were equally mixed and their powers balanced.”<sup>35</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī opens Chapter 8 with the following words: “Know that when God the All Mighty created Adam, peace be upon him, as the first human body to be generated, and made him a root for the generation of human bodies, there remained from his fermented mass of clay a portion from which he created the date palm. The date palm is therefore a sister to Adam and a paternal aunt for us. Hence, the Law identified it as aunt and likened it to a believer. Unlike other plants it possesses wonderful mysteries.”<sup>36</sup> What mysteries? Ibn al-‘Arabī does not tell us, but Qazwīnī does: “The Prophet said: ‘Honor your aunt the date palm.’ He called it date palm because it was created from the remainder of Adam’s clay. It resembles the human being in

respect of the erectness and tallness of its figure, the absence of twists and knots in its stem and branches and the distinction of its male from its female. It dies when its head is cut off. Among all trees it alone has pollen. Its seeds smell like sperm and the covering of its fruits resembles the membrane that encloses the fetus... If one of its branches is cut off it will not be replaced like an organ of the human body, and it is covered with fiber that resembles the hair of humans."<sup>37</sup>

Ibn al-'Arabī says: "After creating the date palm there remained from the mass of clay a portion the like of a sesame grain, hardly perceived. God then laid out Earth in that remaining portion and Earth became [incomparably] spacious ... In Earth [God invested] wonders and mysteries that exceed all rational measurement and that render the rational minds baffled ... including many of the impossibilities that sound rational proofs have judged to be absurd."<sup>38</sup> One of the mysteries of the Earth that Ibn al-'Arabī mentions is that everything in it that the possessor of vision sees, such as metals, plants, and animals, lives and possesses a tongue just as all creatures do that live and speak. Unlike creatures in our world, however, they undergo no alteration because their world is not subject to corruption, nor are they made of the human natural clay.<sup>39</sup> The world that Ibn al-'Arabī is describing is the World of *Barzakh* and its inhabitants are the immutable or fixed entities (*al-a'yān al-thābita*).<sup>40</sup> The behavior that these entities display is governed by the liminal ideality or ideal relativity of space and time, characteristic of intermediate states. Intermediate states are ideal in the sense that they are immutable. But their immutability does not prevent them from displaying opposite qualities. This is because entities in the World of *Barzakh* possess a liminal ideality, which enables them to partake in opposite qualities without losing their specific identity. Ibn al-'Arabī explains this with the following example:

In this Earth I entered a land of red malleable gold.<sup>41</sup> In it there are trees all gold bearing golden fruits. A person would take an apple or some other fruit and eat it to find that it possesses an indescribably delicious taste and a delicate scent. I saw that the size of these fruits was so tremendous that were a single fruit to be placed between Earth and sky it would hide the sky from people's sight or upon Earth and it would surpass it by manyfold. Still when the person takes hold of it with this familiar hand he would contain it owing to its gracefulness and air-like subtlety. Despite its [enormous] size, he would enclose it in his hand. This is impossible according to rational consideration. Upon seeing this, Dhū al-Nūn said what was related by him concerning the large that enters the small while it does not become small and the small does not become large nor the wide becomes narrow or the narrow wide. The size of the apple remains as it was and seizing it occurs with the small hand as I have said. Encompassing it is a witnessed [fact] but except for God it is unknown how this [becomes possible]. Knowledge of this is the Real's exclusively. One day in our Earth is equivalent to several years in that Earth.<sup>42</sup>

The example of the fruit that is incredibly great and incredibly small demonstrates the feature of the relativity of the space dimension of liminal ideals.

Another example that establishes a connection between the space and time dimensions of liminal ideals is the example of the fruits that are regenerated at the same time they are picked, so that the process of renewal of existence is not noticed except by the witty.<sup>43</sup> The example, it should be noted, is related to the mention of the fruits of the trees in the Garden of Paradise in Q 56:32-33: “And fruit in abundance neither picked nor withheld.”<sup>44</sup> Consider ‘Abdullah Yūsuf ‘Alī’s interpretation of this verse: “And fruit in abundance whose season is not limited, nor (supply) forbidden.”<sup>45</sup> Such an interpretation, Ibn al-‘Arabī would insist, takes away from the depiction of liminal entities the element of paradoxicality intrinsic to it, and renders the meaning of the verse inert. This meaning can be comprehended only by the witty, and in a kind of quick shift that corresponds to the shift in the regeneration of the liminal entities. The witty witnesses the shift that connects instantaneously two states of the same liminal entity, while the possessor of rational consideration fixes his gaze on one state and then on another state, thus losing sight of the essential unity of the witnessed entity. This is because for the witty, the limit between the two states possesses a *barzakhī* characteristic in virtue of which it connects even as it separates between the two states; whereas for the unwitty, the limit between the two states is limited to the function of separation. This kind of (rationally) fixed consideration will not be appropriate for capturing the malleable nature of existents in the World of Barzakh. Such malleability seems at odds with the depiction of the inhabitants of the World of Barzakh as fixed or immutable entities. However, as Ibn al-‘Arabī elaborates, malleability does not mean that these entities possess no differentiated identities. On the contrary, their nature seems especially distinguished: “As for [Earth’s] seas, they do not mix together as God the All-Mighty said: ‘He has let free the two bodies of flowing water meeting together. Between them is a barrier (*barzakh*) which they do not transgress (Q 55:19–20).’<sup>46</sup> You witness the waves of the sea of gold strike at each other upon approaching its limits. Next to it the sea of iron which comes in contact with it but the waters of the two seas do not mix together. The waters of [Earth] are subtler in their flowing motion than air [on our Earth], so transparent that none of the creatures that inhabit them or the ground on which their waters flow are hidden from sight. Drink their waters and you will find them incomparably tasty. As for Earth’s inhabitants they grow like plants without mating and bringing forth young. Rather they are generated from soil like worms are generated in our Earth.”<sup>47</sup>

What is impressive is the special and, in a sense, elusive use that Ibn al-‘Arabī makes of Qur’ānic verses to connect with mystical notions. The relation of iron, which is considered a low metal, to gold, which is the aim of alchemical transformation, is like that of salt water, which symbolizes inferior knowledge, to fresh water, which symbolizes superior knowledge. Like the salt waters and the fresh waters, which are united by a *barzakh* that brings them together and keeps them apart at the same time, iron partakes in a *barzakh* that connects and, at the same time, separates it from gold. I will come back to this example in the context of discussing Plato’s myth of spontaneous generation.

Water on Earth is subtler than air on our Earth. It is essential water, the fixed entity of fresh and salt waters being its complementary individuations in our Earth. The most distinguishing feature of essential water is its transparency (*ṣafāʾ*), a feature that Ibn al-ʿArabī assigns in different degrees to all things that exist on Earth. He describes Earth as a whole as “the theatre of the eyes of the possessors of knowledge I.”<sup>48</sup> Ibn al-ʿArabī says that one of the worlds that God created in Earth is in our own image, so that, “when the possessor of knowledge I sees the images in this world he sees himself in them.”<sup>49</sup> **Images on Earth are mirrors. More precisely, they are self-reflecting mirrors because they are our creation. Thus, when they reflect our image, they reflect but themselves.**<sup>50</sup> To say that a thing is a self-reflecting image is like saying that it is contained in itself. Given that by definition, images are accidents, an accident might then subsist in itself, which is contrary to the very signification of the term. Ibn al-ʿArabī, however, is ready to admit this as well as other impossible consequences: “And everything that the rational faculty considers impossible with its proofs we have found it possible of existence and manifested in Earth and *Allah has power over all things* (Q 2:20). Thus we have come to know that the rational faculties are deficient and that Allah is able to bring opposites together, make a body exist in two places, an accident subsist in itself . . . and a meaning subsist in a meaning.<sup>51</sup> Likewise, each saying of the Prophet and each Qurʾānic verse that has reached us, whose manifest (*ẓāhir*) meaning the rational faculty has shifted, we found it fixed in its manifest meaning in Earth.”<sup>52</sup> Commenting on one passage from the *Futūḥāt*, William Chittick says: “No doubt this means that one should be careful to observe the limits of God’s revealed language, and one should not interpret (*taʿwīl*) God’s speech in ways that go against the words.”<sup>53</sup> The rational faculty is deficient because it shifts the words of Scripture from their original meaning by means of an interpretation that goes against the manifest implication of the words. This is especially the case in examples that contain what seems to be a straight violation of rational principles, such as the principle that a body cannot exist in two places at the same time. Consider the verse that depicts fruits that are neither picked nor withheld. For Ibn al-ʿArabī, neither picked nor withheld means *both* picked and withheld.<sup>54</sup> According to rational consideration, however, this is impossible because it means that a body might exist in two different places at the same time. And yet, Ibn al-ʿArabī states this as a fact that he personally witnessed on Earth. Having said this, I must warn us against thinking that Ibn al-ʿArabī would be in the least satisfied with an interpretation that neglects the nonmanifest (*bāṭin*) aspect of reality. Such an interpretation will not be true to the essential signification of the term, and the reasons of those who adhere to it are not more than the reasons of little children:

Since we have come to know that God tied each sensible form to an intelligible spirit by means of a divine inclination according to the property of a lordly name, we interpreted (*iʿtabarnā*) the nonmanifest (*bāṭin*) in the speech of the Lawgiver according to [the proper determination of] the property of

the manifest (*ẓāhir*).<sup>55</sup> This is because what is manifest from [the Qur'ān] is its sensible form while the intelligible spirit in that form is what we call the crossing over (*i'tibār*) in the nonmanifest as we say: "you have crossed over the valley" and we mean: "you have passed [from the one to the other side of] the valley." This is His saying: "In this there is a reminder [*ibra*] for those who have eyes to see" (Q 3:13) and "remember (*i'tabirū*) you who have eyes to see!" (Q 59:2) meaning: pass from the forms that you see with your sensible eyes to the meanings and the spirits that these forms invite in your nonmanifest domain (*bawāṭinikum*). Then you will [truly] be able to perceive the forms with your eyes. Hence God commanded and urged us to exercise crossing over (*i'tibār*). This is a matter that the *ulama* and especially those from among them who adhere dogmatically to the manifest (*ẓāhir*) [interpretation] have neglected, so that all they have from crossing over (*i'tibār*) is reduced to expressing wonder. Thus you find no difference between their reasons and the reasons of little children, since they have never crossed over from the manifest form as God commanded them.<sup>56</sup>

How strange that after citing Ibn al-'Arabī's famous love poem, in which he says that his heart takes every form including the form of the holy Qur'ān and that of the temple of the idols, Goldziher still insists on affiliating him with the Zahirites, the followers of the school of Law that adheres to the exoteric interpretation of the Qur'ān.<sup>57</sup> In an attempt to cope with the strong presence of both exoteric and esoteric tendencies in Ibn al-'Arabī's thought, H. A. R. Gibb and J. H. Kramers state that as to ritual, Ibn al-'Arabī belonged, like Ibn Ḥazm, to the Zahirite school of Law; but in matters of belief, he adhered to esotericism.<sup>58</sup> Even stranger is the special manner in which certain scholars, such as Jabiri, relate Ibn al-'Arabī to Ibn Ḥazm. Jabiri depicts this relation as based on a gnostic conspiracy started by Ibn Sīnā and his "alleged" illuminationist philosophy, and brought to maturity by Ibn al-'Arabī. Such a conspiracy, Jabiri tells us, involves the gnostics' claim that they are sound adherents to the words of the Qur'ān (in the manner of the Zahirites) and that they actually draw all their knowledge from it. Jabiri says that the claim is false and is destined to make a cover for those esotericists who had drawn all their knowledge from the well of the ancient gnostics and clothed it with Qur'ānic garment to carry out their conspiracy without incurring blame upon themselves.<sup>59</sup>

The Qur'ān, however, is not detached from the wisdom of the ancients so as to approve of reflecting on it in absolute isolation from the general history of human intellectuality. Consider, for example, the strong presence of elements from ancient myth in the Qur'ān, which presence is attested by the Qur'ān itself: "We relate to you the most beautiful *stories* by revealing this Qur'ān. Before it you were among those who are heedless." (Q 12:3) In fact, the presence of myth in the Qur'ān is so strong that the Qur'ān itself found it proper to warn against mistaking it for a myth: "When our verses (*āyāt*) are rehearsed to him he says: 'myths of the ancients (*asāṭīr al-awwālīn*).' No but their hearts were stained

by what they had obtained.” (Q 83:13) The heart in the Qur’ān is the organ of understanding, just as the ear is the organ of hearing and the eye of seeing. It is not the eye that sees not but the hearts are blind (Q 22:46). For a soft heart is light that guides in the way and those whose hearts are hardened their light has become weak and they are lost (Q 39:22). Q 83:13 does not condemn the myths of the ancients, but rather the persons who interpret them falsely.

They have eyes but they do not see, and they have ears but they do not hear. They are the epistemological opposites of the possessors of hearts.<sup>60</sup> I think that Ibn al-‘Arabī would agree with this interpretation, as well as the interpretation along the same line of the condemnation of the Qur’ān of poets in Q 26:224–226 and Q 36:39.<sup>61</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī says: “When someone’s heart is in a shelter, or a lock is upon it, or its insight is blind, or it is tarnished, or rust upon it, then God has come between him and understanding from God, even if he interprets the speech.”<sup>62</sup> As we have seen in the passage quoted above, **Ibn al-‘Arabī links interpretation to crossing over (*i’tibār*) from the manifest to the nonmanifest domain, according to a property of determination that unites the two domains and, at the same time, keeps them apart.** Thus, **interpretation (*ta’wīl*) or crossing over (*ta’bīr*) fulfills the creative function of remembering the two complementary aspects of the reality of the manifest and the nonmanifest, as it takes them back to their first (*awwal*) principle in which they originated.** **God tied each sensible form to an intelligible meaning. By crossing over from the sensible to the intelligible, the realizer gains knowledge of the tie, the limit between the manifest and the nonmanifest faces of reality. At the limit, the nonmanifest is brought to manifestation. This is called “creation.” Creation is continuous and permanent. Creation that took place at some point in a distant past and elapsed, not to be repeated again, is a myth. Indeed, it is the greatest of all myths because, properly interpreted, it is the root of the coming into existence of all things. This coming into existence, this passage from essence (the nonmanifest face of reality) into existence (its manifest face), is incessant and endless. That is why the act of creation, which signifies an endless beginning, can be depicted only by means of a tale (*hikāya*) or a myth (*uṣṭ ūra*), and interpretation is called for to cross over from the mythical to the logical, and remember what otherwise would be irrecoverably dismembered.**

#### PLATO’S MYTH OF SPONTANEOUS GENERATION

In *Critias*, Plato mentions a certain division of the Earth that had been executed by the gods. Hephaestus and Athena, being brother and sister and sharing the love of wisdom and artistry, obtained one district that contained “an excellent soil, a generous water supply, and an eminently temperate climate,”<sup>63</sup> and in which they produced a race of good men from the soil.<sup>64</sup> Plato also mentions the myth of generating humans from the earth in *Republic*, where he refers to a Phoenician myth that mentions something that happened in many parts of

the world in ancient times but that would not be likely to happen in his own days—namely, delivering people from the earth. Plato mentions this myth in the context of discussing the special education that citizens should receive in the ideal city. He suggests that an attempt should be made to persuade citizens, rulers, and soldiers alike that the training and education that they imagined, as if in a dream, that they had received in their own city had actually originated somewhere else. Rather, in reality they had been molded, together with their weapons, within the Earth. When their construction had been completed, the Earth delivered them, being their mother and nurse. For this reason, they ought to take good care of Mother Earth and defend her against any attack. Moreover, they should regard other citizens as their brothers because they are the children of the selfsame Mother Earth.<sup>65</sup> As God fashioned those that are fitted to rule, he mingled gold in their generation, but he mingled silver in the generation of helpers and iron and brass in the farmers.<sup>66</sup> If sons were born with an infusion of iron to golden rulers their fathers should not give pity in their treatment and should “assign to each the status due to his nature and thrust them out among the partisans or the farmers.”<sup>67</sup>

This depiction of the social order has caused serious criticism in modern scholarship because it was perceived as highly deterministic and as precluding mobility and social justice.<sup>68</sup> If the educational lot of citizens had been long allocated and their intellectual status, which is an important factor for determining their social rank, had been fixed accordingly, what mission could ideal educators accomplish but open their brothers' eyes to a bad situation that can only get worse given the constantly deteriorating conditions of the human society as it travels farther away from the age of gold?

What transpires in the nonmanifest domain (down within the Earth) should be interpreted as to tie it to things that are in the proper manifest domain. This, however, cannot be the manifest domain that constitutes our own sociopolitical reality but rather the manifest domain in its ideal reality. For example, to compare with rulers in our reality, golden rulers in the ideal state must possess no gold. Hence, their social rank is measured by what they are essentially, not by what they possess—that is, what they are accidentally.<sup>69</sup> The ruler in the ideal state resembles a *Ṣūfī* who keeps polishing his soul to preserve his golden essence. Helpers and farmers are made of less valuable metals, such as iron. But iron in the ideal state does not resemble iron in our own reality. The iron in the ideal state is incomparably more precious than gold in our reality, like water on Earth is subtler than air on our Earth. In the ideal state, everything is ideal; and in this sense, it can be said that all things are ideal to the same extent, for, as Plato says, all things are ultimately of the same original stock.<sup>70</sup>

This also explains the possibility that sons are born with an infusion of iron to golden rulers, in which case fathers should give no pity in their treatment of them and assign to each the status due to his nature, and that sons with an unexpected gold are born to fathers made of iron, in which case they should be

honored and bid them go up higher.<sup>71</sup> In the ideal state, the act of sorting out is executed without complications because proper education allows for that. But in our state, things do not work this way, as Plato makes this clear in the Allegory of the Cave. To interpret our myth properly in relation to our own reality, we must consider, as Plato attempts to persuade us, that the state in which we thought that we had received our education is a dream state.<sup>72</sup> Surely the ideal situation that exists on Earth and in Plato's ideal state is far from any resemblance to the situation that governed the human society at which Ḥayy arrived. The situation in this society is basically the same as the situation that existed in the society in which Ḥayy was generated according to the traditionalistic account. I will discuss this situation in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

### The Traditionalistic Account from the End

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#### DIVINE ORIGINS AND ILLUMINATIVE GRADATIONS

Ḥayy went through seven stages of intellectual development, each consisting of seven years. This period of seven sevens can be divided into three main stages. In the practical stage, Ḥayy developed useful capacities to cope with his physical needs. In the theoretical stage, he examined the nature of the structure of the world and scrutinized the problem of the existence of God. In the mystical stage, he occupied himself with the problem of the relationship between God and the world and the manner in which the enlightened philosopher must conduct his life to connect with the divine, even as he is situated within the confines of the physical reality and detained in a prison (his body) within a prison (the world). At the age of fifty, he succeeded in attaining stabilization in illumination:

One time after another he was able of arriving at that noble station, more and more easily, and linger therein longer until he was able to render arriving at it and departing from it subject to his free choice. Then he held fast to that station and did not turn away from it except for the sake of attending to the needs of his body, which he managed to reduce to minimal measures. In all this, he wished that the All-Mighty God would deliver him from [the distractions of] his body, which diverted him from that [noble] station, so that he might achieve unadulterated pleasure and be released from the pain that he found upon departing from it to care for his physical needs. He remained in that state until he had passed the seventh septenary and became fifty years old. Then he chanced to gather together with Absāl and enjoyed his companionship, the tale of which I shall, God willing, relate to you.<sup>1</sup>

The model of mystical illumination, as Ibn Sīnā presents it in *Ishārāt* and Ibn Ṭufayl represents it in the introduction of his book, finds its conclusion

here. The visitations of the flashes of lightning had become more frequent and lasted longer. The moment that commenced with a single and short-lived flash of lightning, surrounded by darkness, had expanded to encompass the entirety of the seer and bring him close to contact with Truth. His earthly vehicle, however, claimed what was due to it, thus preventing the communion from becoming an absolute reality. The solitary learns that physical reality imposes limitations that must be acknowledged. Later, he will also understand that the relation between his unitary soul and his complex body has its parallel in the relation between the solitary and the human society.

Near Ḥayy's island (discussed in detail in Chapter 3), there was another island populated by a community of believers who followed the religious teachings of an ancient prophet and imitated spiritual truths by means of the imaginal representations that were communicated to them in their religion. Absāl and Salāmān were raised in this community. They observed its Law and loved and desired that which is good. They were also involved in theological discussions concerning such matters as the nature of the attributes of God. Absāl showed clear inclination toward inward meanings, which he discerned by means of esoteric interpretation (*ta'wīl*), whereas Salāmān inclined toward the outward implications of the Law.<sup>2</sup> To interpret is to draw the original, nonmanifest (*bāṭin*) meanings of the words from their manifest (*zāhir*) designations. Hence, interpretation seems to be esoteric by definition, and to say that in his theological discussions with Absāl Salāmān avoided interpretation means that he seriously opposed the latter's ways of inquiry, which is why their separation was inevitable. Salāmān was afraid to think freely and adhered to his community because by doing so, he would be able to drive out evil thoughts and resist opposing opinions.<sup>3</sup> This hardly seems to be an appropriate characterization of a person who desired that which is good, especially considering the rather intimidating description that Ibn Ṭufayl provides for the community to which Salāmān adhered.<sup>4</sup> It turns out, however, that Salāmān's personality is more complex than it seems at first sight, for he occupies a kind of intermediate position between his people and Absāl, who occupies, in his turn, an intermediary position between Salāmān and the ideal spiritual figure represented by Ḥayy. To elaborate, I will use Plato's parable of the Divided Line.<sup>5</sup>

Plato divides reality into the visible and the intelligible, and represents this concept by a line divided into two sections, each of which he divides in the same ratio into two more sections. He represents the visible section as comprising visible objects and their images, and the intelligible section as comprising intelligible objects (forms) and their images (intermediate objects). Plato presents the four sections as corresponding to the four affections occurring in the soul: intellection, which corresponds to the first and highest level; understanding to the second; belief to the third; and picture, or image thinking, to the last.<sup>6</sup>

It is clear from Ibn Ṭufayl's description of the people of Salāmān's community that they occupy the lowest section in this example, for they perceive by fixing images of visible things in their souls and comprehend truths through imitation and by means of the imaginal representations that they store therein.<sup>7</sup>

Although Salāmān partakes in this dogmatic adherence to image reality, he seems to occupy a slightly different position; he shows tolerance, and even some passion, for rational deliberation. It is true that his final position was adherence to whatever dogmatic beliefs he previously held. But it is also true that, “even the most stubborn politician or sophist, who in public will not listen to the philosopher, still is man and can be stirred up in private. The hard shell of his corruption can be pierced and the anxiety of existence can be touched.”<sup>8</sup> Dogmatic people can be stirred up in private if, as Plato says, they are “men enough to face a long examination without running away,”<sup>9</sup> meaning if they are sufficiently free of binding dogmatic conventions to allow for the introduction of some flexibility in their rigid stands. Salāmān fell short of being such a person—he chose to run away and seek protection in the dogmatic conventions of his community. He was afraid that his beliefs would be shaken because of Absāl’s distracting opinions, and his fear alienated him from his friend. Hence, fear must be considered to play a negative role here, as it tipped the scales in favor of dogmatism. At the same time, the very existence of fear implies that Salāmān ought to be distinguished from the rest of the members of his community because he could and actually was affected and stirred up by the debates that he had conducted with Absāl. Had Salāmān failed to be stirred up by a certain inclination (*hawā*) for Absāl’s opinions, he would not have fled and sought refuge with his people.<sup>10</sup>

Absāl, whose state of mind corresponds to the reality of the third and the closest to the highest section in Plato’s Divided Line, made up his mind to ascend even higher. He joined Ḥayy on his isolated island, and there he spent his time leading the life of an ascetic. At this time, Ḥayy was deeply immersed in his sublime stations (*maqāmāt*), emerging from his cave only once a week. This should explain why his encounter with Absāl was so delayed. When Absāl saw Ḥayy for the first time, he had no doubt that he had come across a solitary like himself, and he feared that his presence might interrupt Ḥayy’s meditations. Thus, he ran, but Ḥayy caught up with him and held fast to him so that he could not escape. Sensing Ḥayy’s great strength and the swiftness of his movement and noticing that the greater part of his body was covered with hair and the skins of animals, Absāl was so terrified that he began to beg for mercy. Ḥayy then managed to calm him down by using his body language and employing the sounds that he learned from animals.

#### IMITATION AND INTERPRETATION

An important moment in this encounter occurs when Absāl, who due to his special interest in interpretation had acquired knowledge of many tongues, attempted to communicate with Ḥayy. His attempt failed, however, except for the wonder that it left in Ḥayy’s baffled mind.<sup>11</sup> Ḥayy was fascinated with Absāl’s pleasant voice and distinct words, which sounded distinct from the calls of the animals that he was familiar with.<sup>12</sup> However, in spite of the fascination that the music of the words and the ordered logic of the combinations of their letters created in him,

Ḥayy was out of discursive reach. When Absāl saw that Ḥayy did not know how to speak, his fear of any damage that his company might inflict upon his religious belief was eased, and he became determined to teach him language.<sup>13</sup> Despite his natural inclination towards mystical contemplation, Absāl's intellectual conduct at this stage was still affected by considerations of what Goodman defines as mass religion, especially considerations that are based on fear and hope.<sup>14</sup> Absāl feared for his belief and hoped that by imparting knowledge of the principles of religion to Ḥayy, he would be rewarded by God. In teaching Ḥayy language, Absāl applied a method based upon imitation. He would pronounce the names of things over and over while pointing at them, and persuade Ḥayy to imitate him. Absāl was able to teach Ḥayy nouns in a very short time in this fashion.<sup>15</sup>

It may seem odd that Ḥayy could arrive at the highest levels of intellectual cognition without knowing language. The fact that he was able to learn language in a very short time seems equally odd, given what we know of cases of abandoned children who were raised by animals and who failed to develop any substantial language capacities.<sup>16</sup> As Goodman points out, however, Ibn Ṭufayl puts Ḥayy in the place of Adam as the archetype of mankind.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Ḥayy's example must be interpreted at the general level of mankind, rather than the individual level of this or that specific person.

The problem of the origination of language and the related problem of the relationship between expressions and their meanings were subject to serious debate in the Islamic intellectual community in medieval times. These debates were fueled by the controversy among the theologians over questions of whether the Qur'ān was created and the nature of God's attributes,<sup>18</sup> in addition to the controversy between them and the philosophers over the introduction of Greek philosophy into the Arabic world. Two main views were endorsed: the view of conventional agreement (*muwāḍa' a, iṣṭilāḥ*), which was the view of the Mu'tazilites and the philosophers, and the view of direct inspiration (*tawqīf, ilhām*), which was the orthodox view. The former view held that a certain philosopher assigned specific nouns to things and then spread knowledge of this among the people of his community. The latter view held that knowledge of nouns was conferred by God on a prophet, who transmitted this knowledge to his community. Those who held the view of inspiration sought support for it in Q 2:31: "And He taught Adam the names of all things."<sup>19</sup> Notice how ingeniously Ibn Ṭufayl entwines the naturalistic and traditionalistic views in depicting the birth of language, the same way he did in depicting the birth of man. He describes a process of acquiring language by convention and imitation, but he does not forget to allude to the religious teaching that it was God who taught Adam the names of all things.

Now that Ḥayy was able to use language, he was ready to describe to Absāl how he ascended the ladder of knowledge and came to witness the sublime essences until he made the Station of Arrival his limit:

When Absāl heard his description of the realities and essences which are beyond the sensible world and which possess knowledge of the essence of the

All-Mighty Truth and his depiction, which he tried to present as adequately as possible, of what he had seen at the Station of Arrival concerning the bliss of those who arrive and the pain of those who are veiled, he had no doubt that all the things that had come in the Law concerning God's Command<sup>20</sup> and angels, His paradise and hell, His books and messengers, and the Day of Judgment were but resemblances (*amthila*) of the things that Ḥayy had seen. The eyes of his heart were opened, the fire of his mind was kindled, and the rational concept (*ma'qūl*) coincided for him with the transmitted word (*manqūl*), as the ways of esoteric interpretation and all things masked were revealed to him. There was left no difficulty in the Law or any obscure matter but clarified and solved. He had become one of the possessors of hearts.<sup>21</sup> Then he looked at Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān with the eyes of veneration and admiration and was certain that he was one of the *friends of God (awliyā' Allah) who know neither fear nor grief*.<sup>22</sup> He put himself in Ḥayy's service and imitated him by following his intimations concerning the truth of the religious practices that he had been taught in his community.<sup>23</sup>

The encounter with Ḥayy provided Absāl with a perfect test of verification. Ḥayy had seen through direct experience what Absāl had learned through the examination of the transmitted texts of religion.<sup>24</sup> He had seen the essential meanings (*ma'qūlāt*) that are transmitted (*manqūl*) by means of the words. Absāl had stood face to face with such a person, who had seen the reflections of essences on the polished mirror of his heart. Placing himself as another polished mirror against Ḥayy's, he could now watch his heart being kindled with light. He had placed himself as a faithful, although lesser, member in the ordered chain of the friends of God, thus rightfully earning the title of a possessor of a heart and a master of esoteric interpretation.<sup>25</sup>

The fact that no human taught Ḥayy knowledge provided an especially strong support for Absāl's belief in the superiority of his wisdom. The fact that his immediate wisdom coincided perfectly with the mediated knowledge that he had acquired in his religious community made him see and understand for the first time the principle of his own relationship with his mysterious, supernal self. The rank that Ḥayy occupies in comparison to Absāl's corresponds to the rank that Ibn al-'Arabī assigns for the first Intellect, which in the order of lights is considered the first Lamp that is prior to all other intellects. The other intellects resemble lamps, the wicks of which possess less clarity and limpidness of oil. Consequently, they are less receptive of the light. Although they draw their light from the first Intellect, the light of the first Lamp suffers no decrease:

Each says, "I am like it. How is it more excellent than I? For [light] is taken from me, just as it is taken from it." So it leaps up and speaks, but it does not see the First Lamp's excellence over itself in respect of the fact that it is the root and possesses priority. Moreover, the First Lamp is not found in any sort of matter, and there is no intermediary between it and its Lord. Nothing else has any being [*wujūd* in Chittick] save through it and the sorts of matter that

receive burning from it, such that the entities of the intellects become manifest. All this is absent from the intellects, or rather, they have no tasting of it. How can that which has no *wujūd* save from a father and a mother perceive the reality of that which has *wujūd* without any intermediary?<sup>26</sup>

As Chittick points out, for Ibn al-‘Arabī, the First Intellect is another name for the Universal Spirit, while the other intellects are angelic and human intelligences.<sup>27</sup> This is the spirit that attached itself to the fermented mass of clay in Ibn Ṭufayl’s naturalistic account of Ḥayy’s birth: “In the very middle formed a tiny bubble divided in half by a delicate membrane and filled by a fine gaseous body, optimally proportional for what it was to be. With it at that moment joined ‘the spirit which is God’s,’<sup>28</sup> in a bond virtually indissoluble, not only in the purview of the senses, but also in that of the mind. For it should be clear that this spirit emanates continuously from God. It is analogous to the sunlight that constantly floods the earth.”<sup>29</sup> Ibn Ṭufayl is making a reference here to Q 17:85, “And they ask you concerning the Spirit. Say: ‘The Spirit is from the Command of my Lord. And you have been given but a little knowledge.’” He likens the spirit to the light of the sun. As the sun’s light never ceases to emanate on the world, so also the spirit is indispensably inseparable from the well-proportioned and adequately prepared matter. Notice that Ibn al-‘Arabī says in the passage quoted above that compared with the First Intellect, the other intellects possess no knowledge of tasting. The First Intellect has knowledge of tasting because there is no intermediary between it and its lord. This does not mean that a relationship *does not exist* between the First Intellect and its lord, only that the relationship *is nonexistent*. Ibn al-‘Arabī would say that Absāl has gained a certain capacity for interpretation due to the preparedness and the cleanliness of his heart. The mirror of his heart had been polished to such a degree that it enjoyed a state of nonexistence. Then he could see with the eye of understanding that all the things that he had been taught by the Law were resemblances (*amithila*) of the divine essences that Ḥayy had witnessed in an immediate fashion. Unlike the secondary intellects, however, he was able to distinguish between his own capacity and that of Ḥayy. Absāl regarded Ḥayy as an example to be imitated and a provider of allusions to be followed for the sake of interpreting those things in the Law that seemed to him ambiguous.

#### IBN ṬUFAYL’S LIMINAL DECLARATION

The encounter with Ḥayy enabled Absāl to achieve the aim that was his purpose for coming to the philosopher’s isolated island. He departed from his religious community to care for his own individual spiritual interests, and as far as those were concerned, he was fully rewarded. On the other hand, in his zeal for realizing the potential of his inherent archetypal nature, Ḥayy wished for no less than

lifting all individuals to the status of the universal. In the process, he shunned Absāl's solemn implorations to refrain from taking a regretful step—one that will almost cost him his life. One might wonder, therefore, what real benefit came to Ḥayy as a result of his encounter with Absāl, and whether, considering the dangerous consequences of the encounter, we should regard it as a sort of false promise made to the enlightened philosopher, who is bound as if in a tragic scene to replay his own fate and flee from human society twice.

To begin with, there is some sense in Moses Narboni's argument that the very fact that Ḥayy ended in seclusion from human society with Absāl, rather than being utterly alone, means that spiritual isolation need not be total and that, in principle, it could be achieved within society.<sup>30</sup> Abraham Melamed ascribes Narboni's interpretation to a certain influence exerted upon him by Ibn Bājja, the author of *Governance of the Solitary* and *Conjunction Between the Active Intellect and the Human Intellect*.<sup>31</sup> In addition to Ibn Bājja's influence, Ibn Ṭufayl's depiction of the relationship between the solitary and the human society can be best understood in comparison with Fārābī's depiction of the role of the philosopher as a social reformer. Ibn Ṭufayl's view of Fārābī, similar to his view of Ibn Bājja, was rather negative. He applies against him the same method of criticism that he applies against Ghazālī and that consists of revealing the self-contradictory nature of their works. His references to the two thinkers differ, however, because he seems to find excuses for Ghazālī's shortcomings and, to a lesser degree, for Ibn Bājja's, but he does not seem to be concerned with paying the same courtesy to Fārābī. In my opinion, the reason for this has to do with the fact that he detects a strong mystical element that is explicit in Ghazālī and implicit in Ibn Bājja, but he fails to detect such an element in Fārābī. Fārābī resembles for him the state of philosophy in its (almost) accomplished rationalistic turn. It is important to keep in mind, however, that Ibn Ṭufayl was not against rationalism as such, but only against limited rationalists who fail to see that persons are more than their reasons. Otherwise, what would be the difference between persons reduced to mere believers, dogmatic as to be cut off from the light of illumination, and persons reduced to a close system of rationalistic truths that have become dogmatic even as they have become evidently axiomatic? This will be like a prisoner who is confined in a cave, boasting before his fellow prisoners that his fetters are made of gold while theirs are made of bronze, or, like a blind bird that can fly but cannot see the way out of its confinement.

The examples that I have presented are inspired by the words that Ibn Ṭufayl puts in the mouths of extreme rationalists. He likens those to bats whose eyes are dazzled by the sun and who move in the chain (*silsila*) of their madness and utter follies against the illuminated, accusing him of losing his rational instincts and of discarding the axiomatic rules of the intelligible, such as the rule that a thing must be either one or many.<sup>32</sup> In what sounds like total despair, Ibn Ṭufayl suggests that we leave the rationalist in peace with his reason and fellow rationalists because what he is concerned with is the rational faculty that examines

the sensible existents and extracts universal meanings from this examination, while the possessors of knowledge that Ibn Ṭufayl wants are situated at a level that is above the level of rational consideration.<sup>33</sup>

This statement is significant, as in it can be found the explanation for my insistence on situating the discussion of Fārābī, as well as Ibn Bājjā, in the context of the traditionalistic account. As we shall see, despite the effort that the former invested in achieving harmony between religion and philosophy and the serious and, in a sense, unprecedented attempt of the latter to advance towards liminal philosophy, both thinkers considered rationalism to be the ultimate limit of the philosophical enterprise. However, Ibn Ṭufayl seems to have placed rationalistic philosophy at a level that is transcended by a higher one. He has made a declaration to the effect that rationalistic philosophy plays only a limited role on the stage of the physical world. On this stage, rationalistic philosophers play not the liminal part preserved for illuminationists, but the part of a sect (*milla*), such as the sect that Fārābī invested great effort in contrasting with philosophy in *Book of Letters*. What holds as axioms in this sect of rationalism, even the axiom that the whole is larger than its part, is rather irrelevant in the divine realm, in which “we cannot justly say, *all*, nor *some*, nor express anything belonging to it by such words as our ears are used to, without insinuating some notion which is contrary to the truth of the thing, which no man knows but he that has seen it; nor understands, but he that has attained to it.”<sup>34</sup>

From the perspective of illuminationist philosophy, the limits of rationalism are the limits of the spoken or written word. The knower uses words as he uses the steps of a ladder to ascend and arrive at a certain limit. The knower must transcend the ladder to immerse himself in the abyss of illumination or otherwise be stuck forever with it. This was the fate of Ibn Bājjā, who promised but failed to provide a satisfactory account of illuminationist vision.<sup>35</sup> One might wonder whether this downgrading of the significance of words is what lies behind the fact that we have so little in writing by Ibn Ṭufayl. As a matter of fact, *Ḥayy* is the only work that we have from him, and it is only through this work that we know his philosophical thoughts.<sup>36</sup> Given this fact, one might feel that the blame that Ibn Ṭufayl incurs upon Ibn Bājjā for not elaborating on the state of unity with the divine (*ittiṣāl*) is simply exaggerated. Add to this the fact that many of the things that he says in his work had been previously said by his predecessors, and Ibn Bājjā is a prominent example among these. Thus, his attack on Ibn Bājjā’s rationalism might seem exaggerated, and his promise to establish the principle of a philosophy of illumination that extends beyond rationalism might be exaggerated as well.

I find myself in agreement here with Hawi that although Ibn Ṭufayl’s work shows a clear evidence for the influence of his predecessors, it would be wrong to see in it an amplification or merely an elaborate exposition of their philosophy.<sup>37</sup> I also agree with the testimony of the historian ‘Abd al-Wāḥid of Marrakesh that Ibn Ṭufayl’s book, although slim, is of tremendous benefit in the study of the condition and meaning of human existence according to philosophical ideas.<sup>38</sup>

Ibn Ṭufayl succeeds in interweaving mystical and rationalistic threads of thought in an especially unique manner. The significance of his book stems not from this or that part that deals with this or that subject, as scholars have attempted to show, but rather from the sort of declaration that it makes. This declaration has the radical reexamination of the limits of human understanding as its subject matter and is fueled by a unique concept of liminality that had emerged from a long history of debates between Islamic theologians and philosophers. In the center of these debates stood the problem of the origination of the world. This will be the subject of the next chapter.